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Anuradha Desai

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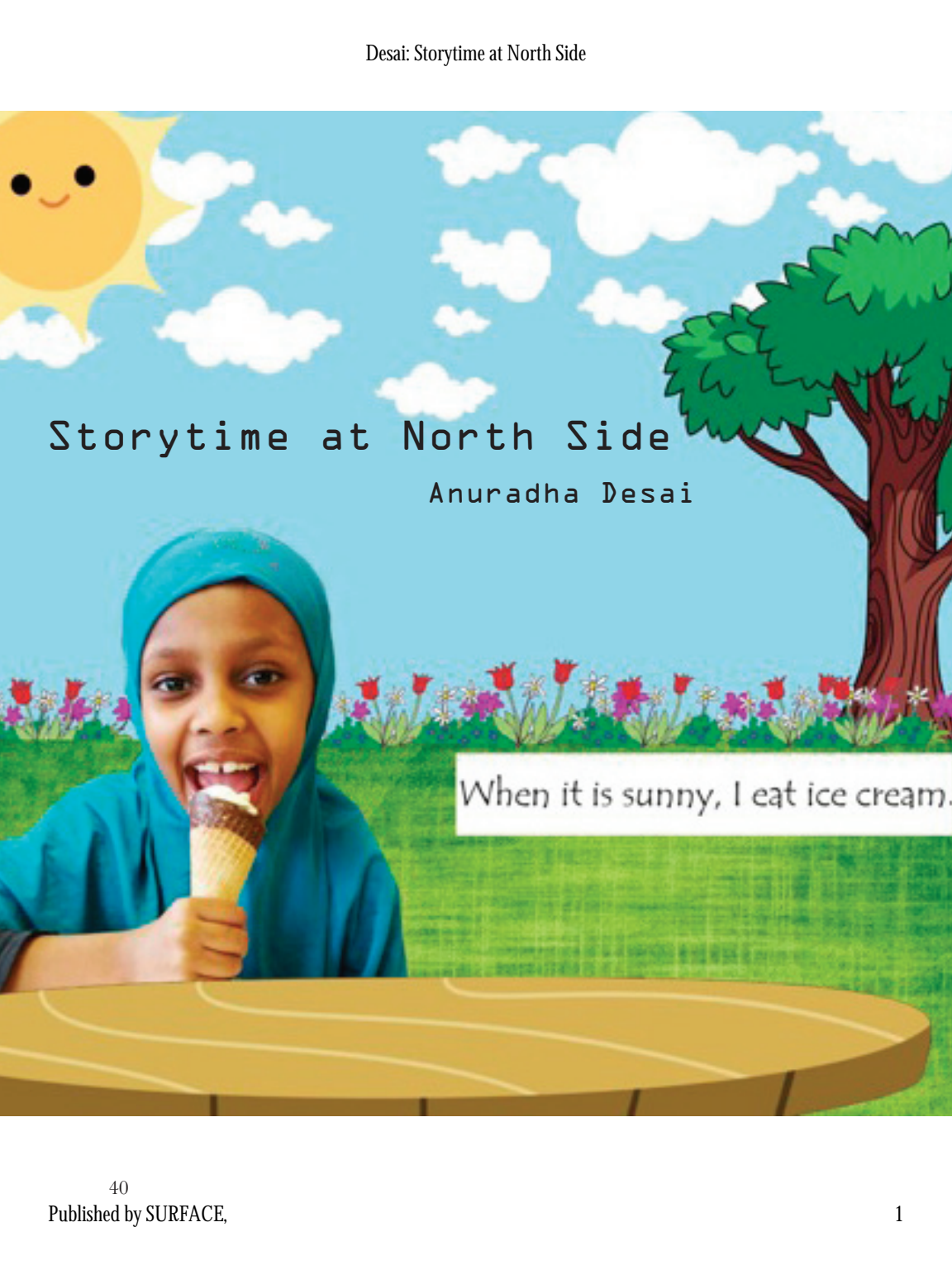
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Storytime at North Side

Anuradha Desai



When it is sunny, I eat ice cream.



Ms. Malinda, the class teacher for the elementary school girls at the North Side Learning Center (NSLC), distributed blank paper and paint bottles in class.

“Draw whatever you feel like,” she announced. The girls dipped their brushes in the bright colors and started filling up the paper. Once they were done, we pinned up each of the paintings on the wall. I was amazed to see that all seven girls had painted a Somali flag.

Most of the students at NSLC are refugees from countries in East Africa, primarily Somalia. The drawings of the Somali flag were a clear indication of their need for images and content to connect with. Not only is there a lack of material that they can relate to, but the existing information that they are provided with is inadequate, uninteresting, and inappropriate for their age and read-

ing level. For example, on my first day as a volunteer at NSLC, I read an extremely monotonous book about weather to the girls. The book did not have any visuals and relied heavily on scientific language. Since they are not native English speakers, it was even harder for them to comprehend.

After spending several weeks at NSLC, I began to understand the need for more representations of children of color. I decided to explore the different ways this has been done in the past, testing out existing children’s literature written by authors from across the globe. These studies would culminate into a children’s book that coherently bind these ideas of representation and communication.

Kira Pirofski emphasizes the need for “multicultural, inclusive and gender-bias free” literature for children and introduces



Anu and students from the NSLC

the concept of a “new classroom,” which caters to the rapidly growing diversity of culture and race in United States (1). She believes that the purpose of such a curriculum is:

To engage an array of students’ intellects, increase language skill, provide minority children with a sense of pride about themselves and their history... [and give] children of the ‘majority’ an understanding of their ‘minority’ peers’ struggles, triumphs, and contribution to our culture and society.

She acknowledges the power of children’s books to “educate and inform” and insists that they must “mirror the diversity of the larger society they represent.” Analyzing sur-

vey data from classic literature, best-selling novels, and basal readers, Pirofski highlights that children’s books fail to “authentically show children of color” (3). She points out that a recommended children’s reading list generated in 1992 by William Bennet, U.S. Secretary of Education, “did not contain any Asian, Hispanic or African-American characters but relied heavily upon their stereotypes.”

Pirofski’s research resonates with my interest in analyzing children’s books as a tool to bridge the gaps of racial and cultural differences while providing a foundation to build upon.

In her aptly titled article, “Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race,” Erin Winkler reveals the complex relationship between children and their understanding of the idea of race. Providing concrete scientific evidence, she contests the popular belief that “children only have racial biases if they are directly taught to do so” (2). She also writes to persuade parents of young children who are avoiding the conversation of racial differences because “the kids are too young to understand” (4).

Winkler asserts that children “develop initial awareness of race as early as six months of age” and they often “construct their own beliefs without adult instruction” (2). For ex-

ample, children notice that skin color is related to neighborhood and occupation when they travel around, leading them to “infer that these are norms or rules” (3). Thus, she enforces the importance of “educating ourselves and discussing [race] with the children in an age appropriate way” (4). This enables all children to maintain pride and a positive sense of self while learning that ethnic prejudices in our society exist and need reform.

She warns parents to be careful of using language and symbolism that could evoke “subtle messages that whiteness is preferable” (3). For example, she mentions how associations with “white” are considered positive, such as “Snow White,” and black are negative, like the “wicked witch.” Children tend to “generalize these linguistic connotations to people” (4). This also aids my research on children’s books as the primary medium for young children to connect to the realities of society. These books cross borders of culture and color, while educating children about race.

I was extremely curious to test these ideas in the NSLC classroom. I requested over a dozen children’s books from interlibrary loan that pertained to various themes like refugees and immigration and that depict children of color.

“Are these all books about Somalis?” asked Durato (Dura-tu). She beamed when she saw the cover page of *I’m New Here* as I removed the rest of the books from my backpack.

“No, but all of these show

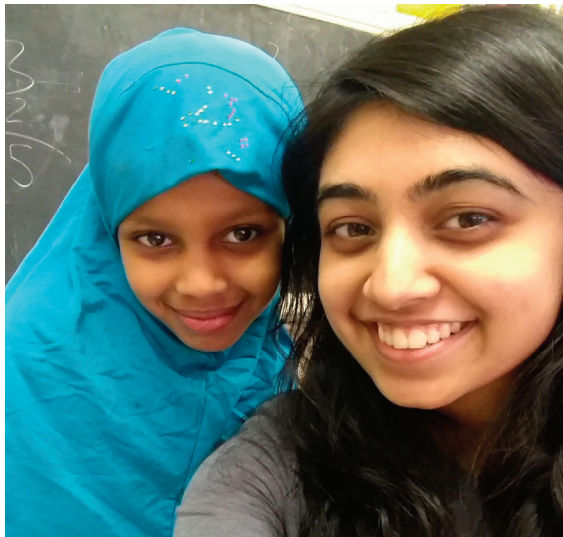
stories of children like you who are new to America. Would you like to read them?” I asked. She nodded enthusiastically.

“These are perfect!” Ms. Malinda exclaimed as she went through the titles. After explaining my research topic to Ms. Malinda, she allotted me time with the girls who were at the highest reading level so that I could gauge their responses to the books.

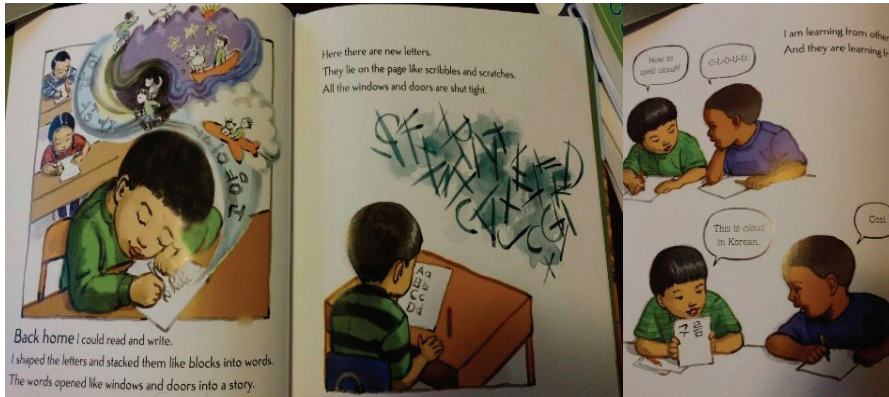
I laid out the books on a desk in front of Durato, Sumiya (Su-mai-a), and Nimo (Nemo), who were all in third grade. I wanted to see which book enticed them the most.

“My...Friend...Jamal!” Sumiya read out. “My brother’s name is Jamal!” she jumped excitedly.

“I know him! Actually a boy who looks just like him. I want to read this,” Durato announced, pointing at Jamal on the cover page. They all agreed to read *My Friend Jamal* by Anna McQuinn. I turned the book to face



Anu and Nimo



Select pages from Anne Sibley O'Brian's *I'm New Here*.

them and let each student read a page. Sumiya commented as she read about Jamal's restrictions. "Even I am not allowed to eat pork because I am Muslim," she said, Nimo and Durato nodding in unison.

Instantly, the girls had identified with the character that reflects their religion and culture. *My Friend Jamal* had enabled the girls to form a connection with Jamal's character in a way that would keep them engaged and connected on a deeper level.

Durato laughed when she saw Joseph and Jamal sitting on the floor eating at Jamal's house. "We eat like this every day, on the floor," she remarked.

"Really? We eat on the dining table," Sumiya replied.

Nimo was a tiny, quiet girl, but she was an exceptionally good reader for her age. "What about you Nimo? Where do you sit to eat?" I asked to break the ice.

"On the floor too," she replied with a smile. "It is like a picnic," she added, picking up from a line in the book that reads: "At Jamal's we get to eat sitting on the floor. It is

like a picnic every day!"

By using the term "picnic" to describe a Somali tradition, McQuinn ensured that the cultural difference is seen as positive and cheerful and not strange or bizarre. Although this may seem like a positive gesture, one could argue that calling the religious tradition a "picnic" is an act of whitewashing their cultural practices when they should be accepted as they are.

"They came here because there's no fighting," Nimo read out. When we flipped to the page that illustrated the genocide with Somali militias, their faces lost all expression.

"That is the reason you guys came here too, right?" I asked.

"My father got shot by one of these men," Nimo pointed at the photograph of the armed men. "He was the last one, and he was trying to escape from them. Now he walks with a limp and very slowly," she continued.

I took a few seconds to respond. "I'm really sorry to hear that, Nimo," I said. This event was not explained by the scholarly



Select pages from Anne Sibley O'Brian's *My Friend Jamal*.

sources that I studied: a moment of literary catharsis. Nimo opened up to me because of the synergy between the book, specific imagery, and our interactions.

"So what did you like about this book?" I asked the girls.

"I like that Jamal and Joseph are such good friends and that they go to each other's houses," Sumiya replied.

"I like that they show real Somalis," Nimo commented.

"I'm done reading now!" Durato sighed and walked away.

I was very pleased with my experience with the children's books that I collected and read with them. By analyzing some of the books, I tried to understand ways in which the author achieves his or her purpose and techniques that I can use in writing my own book. In the book, McQuinn crafts the story of the strong friendship between Joseph, who is white, and Jamal, who is a refugee from Somalia. She very cleverly overlaps art and photography to weave the colorful, bright, and heart-warming nar-

rative: a rhetorical tool that would entice young children to read this book. *My Friend Jamal* fosters interracial friendships, introduces American children to new cultures, and promotes self-love and pride in children of color. The book pertains not only to children but also targets parents who would read the book to them. The language is simple yet aims to teach children new words and concepts like, "Muslim" (5), "Koran" (14), and "refugee" (18).

The cover page portrays Jamal and Joseph with their arms around each other to illustrate their bond. Throughout the book, McQuinn subtly portrays the cultural differences in food, religion, clothing, language, and family life from Joseph's point of view. She is successful in conveying that these differences can be positively embraced and a powerful bond can be maintained. For example, she writes, "Sometimes I go to Jamal's house. It smells different from ours because his mom cooks with special spices" (6). This line achieves multiple goals: it demonstrates the normalcy of going to the home of a

person who is dissimilar in many ways, it prepares one for various sights, smells, and sounds by explaining why it is different, and it assures the children that it is unusual because it is “special” and not pejorative. *My Friend Jamal* offers insights on the diverse content that can be discussed in children’s books and presents how such delicate information can be translated into a narrative for children.

In contrast to *My Friend Jamal*’s real photographs, Anne Sibley O’Brian illustrates the challenges of three immigrant students as they navigate their first day of school in America in her book, *I’m New Here*. She bases the book on her own experiences as an immigrant child from South Korea, which strengthens her purpose and renders the story more convincing. The purpose of the book is not only to prepare the majority group for a new classmate from another country, but also to offer comfort and hope to an immigrant student in America. Through the narratives of the three characters from Korea, Guatemala, and Somalia, she describes the common struggles and problems faced by immigrant children such as language, writing, new ways of doing things, and making friends.

In the beginning of the book, she introduces each of the characters’ problems on a two-page spread: the left page begins with the phrase, “Back home...” and reveals their comfort and happiness in their home country; the right starts with the word, “Here...” and shows the corresponding issue they face in their new environments. The book ends on a positive note as the students overcome the hurdles of assimilation by developing courage with the help of their classmates. This leaves the reader with a feel-good, happy

emotion that subtly inspires both majorities and minorities. She does not shy from using an extremely precise graphical style that resembles the realities of the immigrant’s appearance: clothing, skin color, and facial features. Additionally, the author’s note briefly explains reasons for immigration and encourages young readers to aid their transition.

The simplicity of the story is enhanced by the vibrant watercolor artwork illustrating scenarios to which children would connect. Although she paints everyday scenes of an elementary school, Sibley adds layers of deeper meaning to each page by using short poetic sentences. For example, Sibley writes:

Back home I could read and write. I shaped the letters and stacked them like blocks into words. The words open like doors and windows into a story. Here there are new letters. They lie on a page like scribbles and scratches. All the doors and windows are tight and shut.

Although this quote suggests the difficulty faced in writing English, phrases like “windows are tight and shut” and “scribbles and scratches” can also be interpreted as metaphors to express the character’s loneliness, frustration, confusion, and chaos. Such moments are heartfelt and evoke deep empathy for the children’s situation.

I’m New Here stands as a great example for my research to understand and analyze Sibley’s tools and ideas to structure the book, put forth the concepts of immigration and adjustment and use visuals to support the theme.

I chose to analyze the books *I’m New Here* and *My Friend Jamal* because they are the only books I came across that illustrated Somalis and their culture. The two titles, although similar in their presentation of Somalis, have

different underlying themes: *I'm New Here* is based on assimilation into a new classroom, while *My Friend Jamal* discusses inter-racial friendship. My research and experiences inspired me to create a children's book that relates to the theme of representing children of color. I found out that there is extremely little children's literature that depicts Somalis in English. Thus, I decided to photograph my students and design a book on weather, drawing upon my first experience with the children. The purpose was not only to teach them about weather in an engaging way, but also to provide them with images, ideas, and concepts to connect with.

Ms. Malinda helped me conduct photo-shoots at the end of each class and the girls were more than thrilled to hear that they will be featured in a book. They sat down and acted out a summer picnic, smelled roses and picked up leaves, huddled under umbrellas, and jumped to splash water from "puddles."

"What should I pose for next?" they would ask. We would pick a season and they would quickly act out their favorite activities for each: spring, monsoon, fall, and winter.

"You took her picture and not mine," the girls would complain. "Now's my chance!" they would exclaim and grab my arm to photograph them.

At the end of my volunteering, I had tons of images of the students in different environments and poses and from different angles so that they could easily be created into pages for my book on photograph-editing software, Adobe Photoshop.

The girl in the first page of my book (featured on the first page of this piece) is Nimo, who read a lot of the books I brought. She happened to be eating ice cream during one

of the classes, so I quickly captured the moment into an image. I wanted the pages to be simple yet colorful and bright—something that would appeal to my audience, primarily children. I chose images for the scenarios in such a way that the juxtaposition of the real photograph and animated graphics is complemented.

I plan to create about 12-14 pages, a few pages dedicated to each season. The phrase "When it is..." will be repeated throughout the book to enforce seasonal changes in the childrens' minds, since repetition enables easier learning. To highlight the representation of the girls, I will scale their images to have larger proportions on each page than the background.

When I showed the girls the first page of the book, they were extremely fascinated and eager to see more. Nimo was elated, and when her father came to pick her up, she proudly told him that she was part of a book. I smiled for a very long time.

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